

# FROM GRIDLOCK TO FREEDOM HOW HAPPY COUPLES FIGHT

Last month we debunked commonly held expectations and myths about fighting in marriage. We noted that while couples are different in how they solve differences, happy couples have things in common. They do not fight in a gridlocked way constantly repeating the same mistakes. Instead, they are able to resolve conflicts positively and move forward. How do they do that? We will discuss ways to move beyond that endless loop of negative fighting to positive interactions that lead to happy results.

The first step: Take an honest look at yourself and own up to traits which interfere with having good discussions with your partner about difficult issues.

In other words: What kind of "fighter" are you? Do You...?

- Avoid conflict at all costs?
- Feel criticism or disagreement is an attack on you?
- Hit "below the belt" and regret it later?
- Feel out of control when conflict arises?
- Withdraw and become silent when you're angry?
- Harbor complaints from the distant past?

Most of us have done one or more of these things. That's because in relationships, conflict inevitably arises, and it creates significant emotional discomfort. To be happy, you need to take responsibility for these reactions and be willing to accept the discomfort and respond to

your partner in a healthy supportive manner. We will feel anger and hurt. We need to accept these as normal emotions just like joy and sadness and manage them in a non-destructive way.

After doing some soul searching you agree to make changes. The next step is to learn to communicate fairly when upset. Here are a few ground rules:

1. Stay calm or do not participate - Your goal for the discussion should be how you handle yourself not whether you feel insulted, mistreated or not heard. Even if you do not solve the problem, you will feel successful if you walk away feeling like you have been a kind and thoughtful participant. If you find yourself resorting to the above-mentioned behaviors, take a break. Do something to calm yourself. While doing so, think about your goal for your behavior and how to return to that emotional state. Your partner will notice and possibly begin to react also in a different way. Remember - it takes two to fight!
2. Identify and stick to the subject - Often fights break out because the initial subject leads to a myriad of complaints and nothing gets solved. No "Kitchen Sinking" allowed. If one of you begins to bring in old or new issues, call a halt and get back on track. If you realize the first topic was just a smokescreen for an underlying issue, acknowledge this and deal with the real problem. Stick with one topic until you have come up with a mutually acceptable result, even if you agree to disagree.

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3. Start softly - Take responsibility for your part. No blaming and complaining. Share what you need to but without criticism. Use "I" statements and do not tell your partner what they feel or need. Be appreciative. Remember - trust them to want the best for both of you.
4. Compromise - None of us like to "give in" but we can't hang on to everything we want like a screaming toddler in a store aisle clutching a bag of candy. We need to be reasonable with each other and sometimes it means we let go for the good of the relationship. We accept influence from our partner.
5. Address reoccurring issues. Take a serious look at the things you fight about and identify the ones that come up repeatedly. Try to find new ways to work on them so you can put them behind you.
6. Count your blessings and have a sense of humor. You are together for wonderful reasons. If you remember this and laugh at yourselves it will go a long way to minimizing conflict and increasing your happiness.

Nothing works? Therapy is a tremendous asset. ACS's talented therapists will help you untangle chronic conflicts and find solutions. They are here to assist you.